Journal of Political Science

Volume 21 | Number 1 Article 4

November 1993

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THE RACE FOR THE PRESIDENCY: COVERAGE OF ELECTIONS ON EVENING TELEVISION NEWS SHOWS: 1972-1992

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Nothing has changed the nature of elections in the American democracy more than the power and influence of television. Today television is the main source of news, and twice as many people trust what is broadcast on television more than what is reported by other media (Ranney, 1983, 13-15). Yet after all these years of televised election coverage, little is known about how an American presidential campaign appears to the viewing, and voting, public and how that coverage has changed over time.

Today candidates recognize that citizens have become consumers, who prefer to function as an audience of observers rather than as participants in political contests. Presidential elections are like "horse races," (Patterson, 1980) where candidates vie with one another before a television audience trying to improve their appeal and convince voters of their ability to win. The natural question given a casual audience watching a race on TV is how do the horses run? How do we know when someone is ahead, and how will we measure their lead?

Coverage on the evening news is a desirable outcome for candidates, today's campaigns are scheduled around television. Speeches are written for sound bite editing, rallies are organized to give the illusion of support for the candidate. Candidate staffs are trained to put the best "spin" on a story. One test of candidate success is the amount of television coverage a campaign receives relative to that of the opponent. A large portion of the candidate strategy involves trying to attract coverage, and an equally large amount of the media time involves projecting winners and losers against the backdrop of expectations created by earlier news stories.

Understanding the roles the press and candidate play in campaign coverage is of considerable importance because only a handful of people experience the candidate first hand. If we are to understand how the public develops its images of presidential candidates, it is important to understand how television coverage changes from primary, through the party conventions to the general election.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

There is strong evidence that television news plays a powerful role in shaping public opinion (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Studies of television coverage in recent presidential elections reveal an emphasis on personal attributes such as trustworthiness, strength of character, leadership abilities and compassion on the evening news shows (Weaver, 1981; Graber, 1986; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983). Such qualities are especially amenable to the intimacy television offers to viewers, but the brevity of the medium requires bold pictures to reinforce verbal messages. Content analysis of the network evening news shows that in the past they paid little attention to the issue stands and qualifications of the candidates. Instead, media attention was on the rallies, hoopla, pace and excitement of the race (Patterson and McClure). In 1992 campaign managers and media editors promised a more substantive campaign on issues and candidate character. To present the best side of a candidate, there has developed a cadre of advisors who handle the image of the aspirant (Sabato, 1981).

While much has been written about candidate attempts to control the media reporting, we lack clear conceptual and empirical explanations about the ebb and flow of television coverage and its impact on voters. On a priori grounds the impact of television might be expected to be greatest during the primary elections phase of the presidential selection process. The ambiguity and complexity inherent in the primaries would seem to facilitate television's capacity to introduce candidates and sort out issues. In a 1976 study, Alrich, Gant and Simon

(1978) argued that primary election results affected campaign momentum, poll standing, contributions and media attention. Brady and Johnson (1987) examine the information given the voters and the amount of learning which takes place in the early presidential primaries and conclude that "citizens are informed during the primary season...[and] There is a substantial amount of serious coverage of the candidates."

The results of primaries and caucuses are interpreted in light of how candidates are "expected" to perform, and these expectations are generated by the candidates and the media. The quest for the presidential nomination is in part a psychological battle and television can be influential in creating momentum, which can in turn influence the election outcome. At the nominating convention the role of television becomes paramount. The effects of television coverage are especially important for aspiring vice presidential candidates and party leaders who want to have a voice in future decisions. Conventions have been streamlined to be more attractive to the television audience. Paletz and Elson (1976) examined NBC's coverage of the 1972 Democratic convention and found that television coverage left conflict and disorder as impressions of the event through the procedures of network reporting.

The general election campaign is a better defined situation than the primaries and party convention. The chances of media intrusiveness are less because the networks try to balance their coverage between the party candidates. Television coverage emphasizes who is going to win, how the candidates are doing and how their campaign reflects their capacity to govern. In 1976 Thomas Patterson found about sixty percent of television coverage and fifty-five percent of newspaper coverage in the general election was devoted to the campaign contest (Patterson, 1980,45). Robinson and Sheehan's (1983) analysis of the "CBS Evening News" during the 1980 election found that five out of six stories emphasized the competition, little time was spent on issues of policy. Research on the effects of media have difficulty untangling such effects from other influences. This is especially true in elections, when

compared to the voters' party allegiance, psychological characteristics, or past and current experiences and information, the effects of mass media coverage appear minimal (Neuman, 1986,156). Even so, the rise of electoral consultants coupled with the establishment of television as a trusted source of information, along with the steady decline of party influence in elections, has led to a continued interest of media influences on voting (Nie, et.al., 1976; 1976; Patterson and McClure, 1976; Shaw and McCombs, 1972; Jamieson, 1984).

METHODS AND DATA

This research differs from previous studies in that it examines election coverage from start to finish, and compares coverage across campaign years. Every story aired on the presidential election by the three major networks on any day was coded into the data set. The source of the news stories was the Vanderbilt *Television News Index and Abstracts* of the daily newscasts. Because there is a lag between actual broadcast of the news story and its publication in the Index, part of the 1992 election coverage is absent from this analysis. News stories were coded on the basis of their principal subject matter, the length of the story, their placement in the broadcast and their general content for approximately a two year period before each presidential election. When filmed interviews with candidates, sympathizers or consultants were broadcast, the coding scheme allowed for the recording and analysis of on-camera interviews. Weekend stories were included, but sometimes they were upstaged by sporting events. To be included in the study a story could be on any aspect of the election. The Vanderbilt Television News Archive began recording evening news broadcasts in August of 1968, so the election held that year is ignored here.

The typical way of measuring television news coverage has been to count the number of stories broadcast by the major networks for a certain period of time.[1] Often stories must be of a certain length (usually at least 30 or 45 seconds) to be in-

cluded in the study. Occasionally, researchers have tried to incorporate the importance of lead stories, but calculating their value relative to the other stories is difficult. Research shows that lead stories are remembered by the audience longer than subsequent stories in a broadcast. Each evening news show consists of roughly twenty-two minutes of news and slightly less than ten minutes of commercials. A typical broadcast has four commercial breaks, the important stories appear early in the show with lesser stories trailing through the subsequent commercials. In this study the stories were included if they had at least ten seconds of air time.

The rank order of the stories is used as an indicator of their significance, and the relationship between the length of the story and its place in the news lineup is taken as an indication of its importance and visibility.[2] Every television news story has both a timed length and a rank order in the evening broadcast. Using commercial breaks as a dividing line, a measure of news story "salience" is computed based on the placement of the story in the broadcast line-up multiplied by its timed length. Story "salience" is a measure of television coverage using the dictionary definition of the "noticeable, conspicuous and prominent" importance of a story. This measure assumes that stories at the head of the broadcast are more important than those at the end of the show, and that longer stories are more important than shorter stories.[3] A comparison of television evening news show coverage showing the salience measure for all three networks is shown in Table 1. for the data in the study. There are 12,537 stories in the data set for all the stories in election years 1972 to 1988. The 1992 data is incomplete.

The highest amount of television coverage on the evening network news programs was in the 1976 election, followed by the 1980 election and the 1988 election. These three elections offered exciting contests and new faces to the voters, as such they were especially attractive to the television medium. The amount of attention lavished on the 1976 and 1980 contests is partly a function of the changing nature of

Table 1
Comparison of TV News Coverage

Election Year	Number of Stories	Salience
1968	677	—
1972	2,433	941,880
1976	2,949	1,198,920
1980	2,617	1,185,750
1984	1,915	960,690
1988	1,946	1,126,680
1992	N/A	N/A
Total	12,537	

Source: Vanderbilt Television News *Abstracts*. Stories were coded if there was a designation by the networks that the story subject was the presidential election or campaign.

American politics and the structure of electronic journalism at the time. The evening networks were unrivaled in their coverage of presidential candidates; cable news and the competition of syndicated afternoon shows which draw viewers away from the network news shows was a feature of television still years in the future. Every year since 1979 fewer people have watched what the networks air. By 1990 the combined share of the TV audience which the networks enjoyed had plunged from a peak of more than ninety percent to sixty-two percent. Evening newscasts experienced a twenty-one percent drop in viewership during this period.[4]

The salience measure is able to calculate the rank-order attention given various election stories and combine that ranking with story length. In 1976 there were a thousand more stories broadcast than in the election of 1988, but the placement of the stories in 1988 higher in the broadcast queue meant that the salience figure in that year approached that of the earlier contest. It is also interesting to compare coverage in 1984 with that of 1988 by noting that the number of stories is about equal, but the placement of the stories in 1988 meant that the salience figure in that year was much higher. Even though the number of stories broadcast on a presidential election is decreasing, beginning in 1988 the stories on the evening news were placed higher in the broadcast line-up emphasizing the election more and raising the salience score.

To better analyze the amount and type of coverage given the election by the major television networks the nearly two-year time period of the presidential election campaign is divided into four segments. The first stage is called the preprimary period, and stretches from January the year before the election year until the first primary stories are filed by correspondents in the field. The second period examines press coverage of the presidential primaries, from the first stories broadcast in Iowa and New Hampshire, through key states which illustrate vote-getting ability in strategic regions, until the nomination is clinched by one of the major party candidates. The third period examines the television coverage of

political conventions, which attract huge amounts of media attention in an election year. The final stage is the general election, from its beginnings usually around Labor Day until the final vote in November. Table 2 compares the coverage by the three networks for these phases of the presidential election. The Table exhibits the number of stories in each time period, the salience figure for that time period and the percentage of the total election coverage devoted to that phase of the campaign.

The figures in Table 2 are for the number of stories, salience score and duration of that phase of the campaign. The row percentages show that television coverage of presidential primaries increased dramatically in 1976 as the primary phase of the campaign became the major focus of network coverage in the election. In the years since the 1976 election, TV coverage of the primaries has remained at a level where in every year there is more attention given to them than to the party nominees involved in the presidential race in the fall general election. In 1972, stories about primaries began in January. In 1988 the first primary story was in November of 1987, nearly four months before the Iowa caucuses. American involvement in Operation Desert Storm delayed media attention until the waning weeks of 1991. Preprimary coverage of the 1992 campaign was about half of what it was in 1988. Still the first stories in 1992 were broadcast nearly four months before the crucial New Hampshire primary. A look at the length of the television primary phase of the election campaign shows that it has expanded from about twenty weeks in 1972 to over thirty weeks in 1988 and 1992. The data shows that the media have come to focus on the primary as the heart of the presidential election campaign. Salience scores for this part of the campaign are very high, accounting for nearly forty percent of the coverage in some years.

Part of the explanation for increased media attention to presidential primaries lies in the number of primaries in 1988 as compared with those twenty years earlier. In 1968 there were seventeen primaries, in 1972 twenty-three, in 1988 thirty-

Table 2
Comparison of TV News Coverage:
The Phases of a Presidential Election

	Preprimary	Primary	Convention	General Election	Total
1972	n = 343 (116,870) weeks 01-54 **12%**	n = 606 (213,160) weeks 55-76 **23%**	n = 874 (389,400) weeks 77-88 **41%**	n = 610 (222,450) weeks 89-98 **24%**	n = 2,433 941,880 **100%**
1976	n = 363 (134,280) weeks 01-53 **11%**	n = 1,279 (503,370) weeks 54-76 **42%**	n = 621 (260,350) weeks 77-86 **22%**	n = 686 (300,920) weeks 87-97 **25%**	n = 2,949 1,198,920 **100%**
1980	n = 475 (187,880) weeks 01-51 **16%**	n = 893 (389,260) weeks 52-75 **33%**	n = 562 (269,040) weeks 76-85 **23%**	n = 687 (339,570) weeks 86-97 **28%**	n = 2,617 1,185,750 **100%**
1984	n = 176 (65,850) weeks 01-46 **7%**	n = 769 (374,450) weeks 47-76 **39%**	n = 464 (244,490) weeks 77-86 **25%**	n = 506 (275,900) weeks 87-97 **29%**	n = 1,915 960,690 **100%**

1988	n = 183 (100,810) weeks 01-45 **9%**	n = 768 (439,210) weeks 46-76 **39%**	n = 417 (241,200) weeks 77-86 **21%**	n = 578 (345,460) weeks 87-98 **31%**	n = 1,946 1,126,680 **100%**
1992	n = 118 (53,870) weeks 01-48 N/A	n = 732 (435,750) weeks 49-74 N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
AVERAGE 1972-1988	n = 308 (121,138) weeks 0-50 **11%**	n = 863 (383,890) weeks 51-76 **36%**	n = 588 (280,896) weeks 76-86 **26%**	n = 613 (296,860) weeks 87-98 **27%**	n = 2372 (1,082,784) **100%**

eight and in 1992 thirty.[5] But the differences in television coverage involve more than the number of primaries. A comparison of the 1972 and 1976 campaigns in Table 2 shows that the total length and number of stories for the two presidential campaigns was about even, yet the attention given to the primary contests in 1976 was nearly twice that of 1972. Why was there so much more primary coverage in 1976? Part of the explanation may lie in the nature of the contest that year, both parties had a tight race for the nomination.

The length may also be explained by advances in media technology which had improved to the point where the networks could get more and better film from the field for presentation on the evening news. What may be in evidence in Table 2 is the influence of economics on evening news coverage. In the 1970's vast encampments of network reporters accompanied candidates from primary to primary. In the 1992 race not one of the networks assigned a reporter to each major candidate during the primary. Instead of following the candidates with reporters, the networks provided film and commentary on the race from desks in New York and Washington. The primaries are attractive to the networks because they are where the controversy and contest is in American politics. The networks are competing with one another to gain an edge and give the party nominee to viewers as early as possible. They are the place to "scoop" the competition, and every year since 1976 primaries have remained as the focus of network coverage.

At one time decisions about the Democratic or Republican nominees were made in deliberations at the convention hall, but now the delegates merely ratify the choices already made in the primaries. About the only suspense at the convention is the choice of the vice-presidential nominee and whether the party will be united for the upcoming election. Television coverage has always featured the political conventions; coverage of the conventions rates as the highest weekly salience score of any event in each two-year election cycle. The percentages in Table 2 show that about one-fourth of the television coverage since the 1972 election is focused on the conventions.

The last phase of the campaign, the general election, is a time when candidates engage in debates, while reporters speculate as to how the two candidates are faring with the voters. At this stage of the contest, no issue is more important than television "exposure." In the general election it is hoped that with evening news broadcasts will come a better understanding of the candidate and the campaign's themes. Research on political campaigns focuses on the events of the general election even though the majority of television time concerning candidates has already been completed. This last phase of the presidential campaign occupies roughly 25% to 30% of the total election coverage. The salience scores in the last few weeks of the fall general election campaign reflect the attention given party nominees before and after presidential debates (weeks 88-98).

An average of the salience scores is shown in the last row of Table 2. The figures show that coverage is incidental in the preprimary stage, rising to a crescendo in the primary period. The coverage in February and March is especially high. Coverage diminishes in the early summer, but rises for the conventions in July and August. The general election features coverage which varies with debates and controversy, but rises in the week before election day. The pattern holds regardless of contestants, issues or events; the rhythm of an election follows this predictable pattern.

PRIMARY ELECTIONS

The controversy which once inhabited the convention hall and the smoke-filled rooms of nearby hotels, is now reserved for presidential preference primaries. Today primaries mean media exposure, money pouring into the coffers of the perceived front-runner, and the likelihood of a stump speech gaffe which is suitable for replay on television. Primaries convert the selection of party candidates into highly visible, sometimes bitter, competition among people in the same party who must eventually come together in public to back the party nominee.

Controversy is everywhere apparent in primaries and usually the subject of television journalism.

Nowhere is the speculation richer than in the early primary contests where some candidate can be declared the winner or loser with only a fraction of the total potential vote. Iowa and New Hampshire are the places where candidates are first sifted. Traditionally for Democrats, the Iowa contest has become a place where "outsiders" can ride the magic carpet to success. George McGovern ran unexpectedly close behind Ed Muskie in 1972, and Jimmy Carter used a straw poll victory there to get wind in his sails for 1976. In 1984 Iowa gave Gary Hart six percent more of the vote than expected and the press immediately declared a "two-man race" as a consequence. In 1992 favorite son Tom Harkin's candidacy made the Iowa primary less important, so the focus shifted to the subsequent New Hampshire contest. Both parties had important contests in New Hampshire, Pat Buchanan challenged President Bush and Bill Clinton faced questions about his draft status and his alleged affair with Gennifer Flowers. The media have made the primaries, especially the early ones, the litmus test of electability.

The change in television coverage of primary contests is seen in Table 3. The table shows the salience attention based on the number of stories originating in primary states in the elections from 1972 through 1992. The figures in the table are the percentages of total television time in the primary phase of the election contest devoted to candidate and voters in thirteen states that are crucial to victory in election between 1972 and 1992. In the 1972 presidential election, primary television coverage in these thirteen states represented over two-thirds of the total attention given the period. In 1976, the figure of television attention to these primaries shrank dramatically, and until recently they accounted for about forty percent of total primary attention. In 1988 the television coverage devoted to Iowa and New Hampshire accounted for nearly half of the coverage given candidates in the primary period. In 1992 the focus was early on the New Hampshire election, then the

Table 3
Media Coverage of Presidential Candidates in Primary States

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Iowa	1.7%	1.2%	6.6%	8.2%	33.7%	—
New Hampshire	10.5%	8.6%	9.3%	8.0%	14.8%	15.8%
Wisconsin	9.5%	2.0%	2.9%	—	3.4%	—
Pennsylvania	4.0%	5.0%	4.0%	4.4%	1.3%	1.3%
Massachusetts	1.9%	5.6%	3.2%	3.2%	—	—
Indiana	2.4%	2.2%	—	—	—	—
Ohio	3.1%	—	1.9%	—	—	—
Florida	12.2%	4.5%	2.4%	4.5%	1.5%	1.4%
Oregon	6.7%	1.0%	—	—	—	—
California	13.9%	2.9%	2.9%	4.2%	4.2%	5.6
New Jersey	—	1.0%	—	—	—	—
Illinois	2.1%	4.3%	6.5%	5.6%	4.6%	2.6%
Other	32.0%	61.7%	60.3%	61.9%	36.5%	26.7%

southern states in the "Super Tuesday" primaries of which Florida was a key part. California was an important primary state because it came on the heels of the urban riots and was used as a gauge of urban attitudes about federal aid to cities. The figures in Table 3 show a "calendar bias" reflected in the coverage of the early primaries, and a general fascination with how candidates appear as media celebrities. As a subject Iowa has expanded rapidly in comparison with other states and New Hampshire attracts a consistent, and less variable, amount of primary coverage. In 1992 Bill Clinton addressed criticisms of his private life before the New Hampshire primary. The performance established him as the front-runner in the Democratic contest, and was the benchmark for his subsequent presidential victory.

With the exception of the early primary states, the percentages in Table 3. are uniformly decreasing. All states lost in media attention with the increasing number of primaries, including some which played dramatic roles in determining eventual party nominees. For example, in 1976 the Pennsylvania primary was the climactic contest in the Democratic selection process, but it only attracted 5% of the total primary coverage. States with large populations, and an impressive number of electoral votes, do not attract a commensurate amount of attention on the evening news. The Illinois primary has a fairly steady record of coverage, but Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Florida have very uneven records. Victories in these states, with their diverse geography and populations, are crucial to proving vote-getting ability, yet they fail to garner a proportionate amount of television coverage.

California, which has twenty percent of the electoral votes needed to win the presidency, only receives about four percent of the television coverage given to candidates in the primary phase of the election. The demise of California is easily explained by "calendar bias" since television is attracted to the early story. The subsequent story, no matter how profound, is less interesting in comparison. While it is true that more states are having primaries, and that the primary season is

longer, these are not the reasons for more primary coverage. Instead, the agenda for primary television coverage is driven by the calendar and the organizational patterns of news gathering. The early primary contests are easily scheduled and anticipated, the subsequent primaries, even though they may be critical to the election outcome, usually get attention only in the week before the voting. The 1988 election was a time when the early contests in Iowa and New Hampshire were subjects for speculation and exaggerated importance, and in 1992, New Hampshire was the first show for presidential candidates . As a result the early primaries captured most of the television coverage given primaries in a year when primaries were the major focus of television coverage.

DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS

In the twentieth century political parties have grown steadily weaker because they have lost control over candidate nominating procedures. Television has expanded a politician's ability to deal directly with the public and minimized the role of parties in the electoral process. If pictures and time on the air count for improved standing, then the Democrats should have an advantage in presidential elections since they contest the primaries more often than Republicans. Of the five elections in this study, the Democrats have been the incumbent party only once, in 1980 when Jimmy Carter lost to Ronald Reagan. In three of the five elections (1972, 1976 and 1984) there was an incumbent GOP president in the contest, and George Bush had many advantages of incumbency in 1988 when he was vice-president.

All this means that it is unlikely the Republicans would have early visibility in the media spotlight for the primary elections. The Democrats should start earlier, garner more television attention and have better name recognition by the time of the fall general election.

Percentages in Table 4. show the coverage Democrats and Republicans receive in the four phases of a political cam-

Incumbent Democrat

1980

Preprimary		Primary	
Demos: n=328 (139,570)	74%	Demos: n=362 (161,150)	41%
Repbs: n=111 (39,110)	21%	Repbs: n=365 (157,130)	40%
Other: n=36 (9,200)	5%	Other: n=166 (70,980)	19%
Convention		**General Election**	
Demos: n=268 (135,650)	50%	Demos: n=204 (107,030)	32%
Repbs: n=256 (117,170)	44%	Repbs: n=295 (146,520)	43%
Other: n=38 (16,220)	6%	Other: n=188 (86,020)	25%

No Incumbent

1988

Preprimary		Primary	
Demos: n=125 (73,410)	73%	Demos: n=374 (216,920)	49%
Repbs: n=49 (21,660)	22%	Repbs: n=286 (161,890)	37%
Other: n=9 (5,740)	5%	Other: n=108 (60,400)	14%
Convention		**General Election**	
Demos: n=212 (126,600)	53%	Demos: n=181 (108,960)	32%
Repbs: n=171 (97,770)	41%	Repbs: n=212 (125,330)	36%
Other: n=34 (16,830)	6%	Other: n=185 (111,170)	32%

Table 4
Campaign of Television Coverage:
Democrats and Republicans in Campaign Phases

Incumbent Republican

1972

Preprimary		Primary	
Demos: n=203 (70,610)	60%	Demos: n=488 (180,980)	85%
Repbs: n=81 (26,120)	22%	Repbs: n=56 (12,730)	6%
Other: n=59 (20,100)	18%	Other: n=62 (19,450)	9%
Convention		**General Election**	
Demos: n=519 (242,280)	62%	Demos: n=206 (83,040)	37%
Repbs: n=229 (91,720)	24%	Repbs: n=226 (84,140)	38%
Other: n=126 (55,400)	14%	Other: n=178 (55,270)	25%

1976

Preprimary		Primary	
Demos: n=109 (41,920)	31%	Demos: n=654 (245,790)	49%
Repbs: n=190 (76,490)	57%	Repbs: n=408 (181,770)	36%
Other: n=64 (15,870)	12%	Other: n=217 (75,810)	15%
Convention		**General Election**	
Demos: n=222 (87,610)	34%	Demos: n=160 (81,850)	27%
Repbs: n=355 (156,350)	60%	Repbs: n=257 (123,460)	41%
Other: n=44 (16.390)	6%	Other: n=269 (95,610)	32%

1984

Preprimary		Primary	
Demos: n=110 (43,430)	66%	Demos: n=567 (283,200)	75%
Repbs: n=34 (12,650)	19%	Repbs: n=66 (31,700)	9%
Other: n=32 (9,770)	15%	Other: n=136 (59,580)	16%
Convention		**General Election**	
Demos: n=268 (149,970)	62%	Demos: n=192 (102,920)	37%
Repbs: n=114 (61,680)	25%	Repbs: n=187 (104,050)	38%
Other: n=82 (32,840)	13%	Other: n=127 (68,930)	25%

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continued

paign. The amount of the coverage, rather than the tone, is the focus here. The higher figures are generally for Democrats in the preprimary and primary stages of the election. The anomaly in the Table is the 1976 election where a disproportionate amount of attention was heaped on the Reagan and Ford contest even though Ford was an incumbent officeholder. Aside from the lead Republicans had in this 1976 convention period, Democrats uniformly received more attention at the preprimary, primary and convention stage of the election contest.

In the general election, the amount of coverage has favored Republicans in both incumbent and non-incumbent years. While in some years this advantage has been slight (i.e. 1972 and 1984), at other times the advantage has been significant (i.e. 1976 and 1980). In 1988 the Republicans had a respectable edge in coverage. The striking finding here is that Republicans turn the tables on their Democratic opponents in the all important general election period. These measures are for the amount of television coverage only, no consideration for the subject or slant of the story is coded in Table 4.

Why do Republicans enjoy advantages over Democrats in terms of the amount of coverage in the general election? One reason may be the power of incumbency Republicans enjoyed during most of the time of this study, another explanation may lie in the dominance Ronald Reagan always evinced where the media was concerned. The explanation may be as simple as the fact that Republican debate gaffes (Ford in 1976, Quayle in 1988) as well as debate and advertising successes (Reagan in 1980 and 1984, Bush in 1988) attracted subsequent television replays. For whatever reason, the figures in Table 4 show a reversal of the dominance Democrats enjoyed before the general election period.

FILMED STORIES AND COMMENTARY

Television is an entertainment medium, and as such it seeks to attract viewers by focusing on personalities. Television pre-

sents news in a point of view format because viewers identify more strongly with people than with abstract ideas. TV news favors interesting visuals of important people saying important things; the story should be short, have exciting pictures and a clear plot. In a presidential campaign the events of each campaign day, the appearances before select audiences and the themes of prepared speeches are all set with the local and national news shows in mind.

The television news format does not provide detailed, substantive information; instead, it focuses on visuals that cut to the core of the conflict. The technology of television news is aimed at increasing the visual presentation of people and events. Today computer graphics generators, electronic editing and satellite technology are all used to give more pictures to the viewer at home. The data gathering scheme for this research project encoded recorded interviews for each story broadcast by the three networks during the campaign. Up to three interviews were coded for a story. Although a few stories had more than the allotted three interviews, more often than not in such cases the multiple interviews were a repeat interview with the same person so the three interview limit captures most on-camera presentations. Table 5 shows the number of filmed interviews as a percentage of the number of election stories.[6]

The percentages in the last column of Table 5 show that the number of filmed interviews in television news stories has been increasing since 1972. The number of second and third interviews went up dramatically in the 1980 presidential campaign. This was largely due to the widespread use of newer technology and the tendency of television to reduce the sound bite of a news story to accommodate more film and a faster pace on the evening news show.[7] Throughout the duration of this study the typical election news story has remained stable, averaging around two minutes; but the number of interviews, especially filmed interviews, sandwiched in such a story has increased. In 1972 an evening news story was fortunate to have one filmed interview with the principal story subject. By 1988 the filmed interview was a part of most

Table 5
Number of Filmed Interviews in Television News Stories
1972 - 1988

	First Interview	Second Interview	Third Interview	Total Number	Filmed Interviews as a Percent of Total Stories
1972	1,163	295	56	7,299	1,514 **20.7%**
1976	1,685	489	87	8,847	2,261 **25.6%**
1980	1,954	847	223	7,851	3,024 **38.5%**
1984	1,514	990	439	5,745	2,943 **51.2%**
1988	1,504	1,024	514	5,838	3,043 **52.1%**

television stories, and follow-up film comments with the campaign manager, a member of the audience or a leading supporter or opponent were not unusual.

As the capacity of television has expanded to present film of diverse events, so too has the tendency of television news stories to present controversy. Real life is usually not dramatic, and most events do not have a neat or easily understood story plot, but television demands conflict and drama for each presentation. The medium itself asks that pictures be supplemented with controversy. Election stories are frequently simplified to candidate versus candidate, or a Democrats versus Republicans format to supply balance and create drama or disagreement. News coverage of a single event, like the result of the Iowa or New Hampshire primary, must subsequently be reformulated into the "who's the front-runner" format to add excitement to the race. The political nature of an election campaign means that any statement is subject to interpretation, so television manufactures conflict by asking for an on-camera comment from an opponent or competitor. The advancing technology makes candidate statements and announcements subject to instant commentary. How better to spice up the "who's the front-runner" story than with some comment by a candidate who did better or worse than predicted? In Table 6 the "reaction" stories, defined as stories where a political opponent is allowed a filmed comment in a subject's story, are shown.[8]

Table 6 gives the number of stories in the general election phase of a campaign when a member of an opposing campaign, or the nominee of a contesting party, was allowed on-camera commentary. The figures show that Republicans have a slight edge in responding to Democrats, and that the tendency of television reporters is to include more stories of this type. While less than six percent of the total number of filmed stories were conflictual and the total is not a large number of stories, the inclusion of these stories coupled with more film of daily campaign activities means that viewers are exposed to an increasingly complex visual menu.

Table 6
Filmed Reaction Stories
1972 - 1988

1972	**Democrats to** Republicans	n = 14	**1.2%** of all filmed stories
	Republicans to Democrats	n = 5	
1976	Democrats to Republicans	n = 12	**1.1%** of all filmed stories
	Republicans to Democrats	n = 12	
1980	Democrats to Republicans	n = 32	**2.8%** of all filmed stories
	Republicans to Democrats	n = 55	
1984	Democrats to Republicans	n = 46	**3.9%** of all filmed stories
	Republicans to Democrats	n = 68	
1988	Democrats to Republicans	n = 76	**5.6%** of all filmed stories
	Republicans to Democrats	n = 94	

Reaction stories are stories where an opposing point of view is presented on film in the broadcast.

There have been substantial changes in the way television presents pictures of the American presidential election; such changes may help account for some of the recent concerns about voter apathy, negativism and dissatisfaction with government. First, there is the very nature of the television presentation. The rhythm of five election campaigns is seen in a comparison of the amount of attention given elections and the placement of those stories in the news line-up. There are fewer television stories broadcast on the election contest today, but they are given more play by news producers in the evening news line-up. The subject matter of these stories is increasingly centered in the primary campaign. By looking at the television coverage over the nearly two year period the attraction to primaries becomes evident. States with early primaries profit from the desire of television to be first to give the viewer the eventual party nominee. The unstructured nature of the primary season allows television to intrude with an explanation and prediction about the outcome. This research confirms that more and more television stories are devoted to the coverage in primaries. The build-up to the early primaries is followed by diminished attention to subsequent state primaries which might be crucial to determining the party nominee.

After the early primaries, television stories build to the party conventions. The conventions are often devoid of issue content, but high in the human drama and personal conflict familiar to television audiences. Democrats get more coverage than Republicans in the early going of a campaign. Once the fall general election begins both major party candidates rely on the television evening news shows to present their case for election. The rise and fall of their fortunes is often a consequence of their debate performances. Important from a television standpoint is the fact that nearly three quarters of the total network media time given to a presidential election has been expended before the fall general election begins.

Second, the powers of presidential incumbency, at least

where television is concerned, should not be exaggerated. In the fall campaign media attention is often more a consequence of the debate schedule. Each party nominee is treated as a viable candidate, but Republicans do slightly better in terms of the amount of coverage in the general election phase. The quarrels of Democrats early occupy the television medium, by contrast Republicans appear as co-stars mainly in the fall.

Third, the nature of the television election story has changed to where more film is used with more quotes and opinions by diverse commentators. The candidate comments are reduced, and subject to analysis and interpretation by a host of on-camera interviews. The stories which appear on television screens are characterized by film which emphasizes conflict, the contest and political opinions. To the viewer at home, the presidential election campaign is a visual collage of opinionated snippets which feature more and more filmed attacks on an opponent and opinions about his motives.

Television presentations emphasize controversy in the contest, with film and explanations for success or failure. Such a menu can appear to be negative on its face. Although research on the political media has emphasized its minimal effects, there are those who think television contributes to the growth of political cynicism and malaise. Of all the explanations about voter apathy, or rising voter disillusionment with elections, none has yet treated what is suggested here - that the nature of the television presentation is such that it treats voters to a boring two year mini-series with tired actors and predictable outcomes. To spice up an otherwise dull plot, television keeps controversy alive by playing filmed interviews, attacks and commentary. The nature of the presentation is such that what appears as negative may be justified as better television coverage.

NOTES

[1] For elections the research of media coverage tends to focus on the general election phase of the presidential campaign, from Labor Day (i.e. early September) to the November election date. Some coverage is given to candidates in the primary stage of the campaign. Here stories were selected if they had a network election designation, usually indicated by a "Decision 1980," or "Election '76" or some similar tag.

[2] The assumption of rank order influence is based on the research of: Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 34-46.

[3] An example of the salience calculation is a story broadcast by CBS on Wednesday, May 4, 1988. After the first commercial a two minute and 50 second story was run on Michael Dukakis' strategy for winning the Democratic nomination. Stories before the first commercial were multiplied by five, after the first commercial by four, after the second commercial by three, and so on throughout the broadcast. There was a time when ABC had six commercial breaks in their broadcast, with the first one occuring just seconds after the introduction of the evening news show. For these ABC stories the first break was ignored. The formula for calculating salience is:

placement	x	time	=	salience
4	x	170 seconds	=	680

As a comparison of the salience measure the same CBS story would have the following salience scores in different placements within the broadcast:

Before the first commercial	5	x 170 seconds	=	850
After the first commercial	4	x 170 seconds	=	680
After the second commercial	3	x 170 seconds	=	510
After the third commercial	2	x 170 seconds	=	340
After the fourth commercial	1	x 170 seconds	=	170

The rough equivalenceis of the salience scores for this story are that as a lead story, or a before the first commercial story, the salience score of 850 for a two minute and fifty second story is equal to a story of four minutes and forty seconds in the third position. To equal the 850 salience figure a story after the fourth commercial would have to run for fourteen minutes and ten seconds.

Coding was fairly straightforward. A lead coder coded stories for a particular year, then an investigator would select random days to check for reliability. There was 93% coding agreement in the year before an election, and 99% with the election codes during the election year. Length, placement, subject matter, location and content variables were all over 94% for all election years. The coding of speakers and actions in filmed interviews was less precise, but still averaged 87% for all the election years.

[4] Jon Katz, "Say Goodnight, Dan." *Rolling Stone.* June 27, 1991.

[5] John Havick, *American Democracy in Transition.* New York: West Publishing Co., 1991,
p. 117. *Congressional Quarterly*, July, 1992.

[6] The calculations of the percentages in the last column of Table 5 were based on the total number of stories broadcast in an election year. If a story was aired a total of three interviews was assumed. The percentages in the last column are total number of actual interviews over the total number of possible interviews. William Adams and Fay Schreibman, (eds) *Television Network News: Issues in Content Research*, Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, 1978.

[7] Daniel Hallin, "Sound Bite News: Television Coverage of Elections, 1968-1988," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C, 1990.

[8] To confirm that reaction stories were conflictual, a random sample of twenty-five stories were examined to confirm that opponents were not agreeing on certain points with the candidate or displaying a different rhetorical style. In every

interview, save one (where the reaction was more neutral), the opponent interviews were in dissent to the position of the candidate.

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